

VZCZCXR02458
PP RUEHDH
DE RUEHRH #0139/01 0311219
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 311219Z JAN 10
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2410
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHHRAN PRIORITY 0463
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 0573

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000139

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP, S/GWI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/24/2020
TAGS: PGOV PHUM SA SOCI KMPI KWMN

SUBJECT: WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN QASSIM STRENGTHENED BY
PRINCESS NOURA

REF: A. 09 RIYADH 899
1B. 09 RIYADH 875

RIYADH 00000139 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Although often considered the heart of the conservative Nejd region, the province of Qassim is home to a cohesive, locally-driven women's movement focused on pragmatic steps to improve the status and daily life of women in Qassim. Under the patronage and guidance of Princess Noura bint Mohammed, various civil societies run by the women of Qassim have continued to increase their outreach, training, and funding, while concurrently strengthening their institutional capacity and their impact. At the invitation of Princess Noura, Dr. Janet-Breslin Smith and Emboffs met with her and other leaders of various women's civil societies in Qassim in order to identify possible areas in which Post can increase cooperation. These include establishing an American Corner in Qassim; providing workshops on youth leadership development and how to recruit, empower, and lead volunteers; and assisting in the preservation of traditional arts and handicrafts. End Summary.

ONAIZA: BORROWING FROM THE WOMEN IN BURAYDAH

12. (SBU) Under the patronage and guidance of Princess Noura bint Mohammed, wife of the Governor of Qassim and grand-daughter of King Abdulaziz, the King Abdulaziz Philanthropic Association (KAPA) for Women in Buraydah has been transformed from a weak, directionless, state-organized civil society, into a dynamic, broad-based women's organization that successfully provides social and economic support, as well as business opportunities, to the women of Qassim. (NOTE: Post has been discreetly cooperating with Princess Noura for over 4 years, and previously visited Qassim in March 2008 and June 2009. We reported in-depth on the KAPA and the Qassim Ladies' Committee in ref A. END NOTE.) Inspired by KAPA's success, and eager for more local support, the women of Onaiza -- again, under the leadership and guidance of Princess Noura -- established their own local women's branch approximately two and a half years ago, at the Princess Noura Social Center. (NOTE: The two largest cities in Qassim are Buraydah and Onaiza; Buraydah is the larger of the two. END NOTE.)

13. (SBU) Onaiza's Princess Noura Social Center is still in its infancy, but its leaders are borrowing best practices

from both KAPA and the Qassim Ladies' Committee in order to create a co-ed organization that provides comprehensive social and economic support, focused in large part on women coping with poverty, isolation, and social restrictions. The women's branch is focused on strengthening the technological, language, and management skills of the women of Qassim through training and development programs. A successful Heritage Revival section, which trained 120 women in 2009, is being improved and expanded in order to offer increased economic opportunities to Onaiza women. In addition to these offerings, the Center houses the only library for women in Qassim, and there are plans for its expansion. Although the Center is currently housed in a small, dilapidated building, an enormous new state-of-the-art building, equipped with the latest technology and rivaling KAPA's new training center, is currently under construction and is expected to be completed in 2010/11.

BUT RUFFLED FEATHERS EXIST...

¶4. (C) Another organization, the Onaiza Women's Charity (OWC), was also established about two and a half years ago as a spin-off of the Qassim Ladies' Committee. However, unlike the Princess Noura Social Center, which has worked closely with KAPA, the Qassim Ladies' Committee and Princess Noura, the OWC has largely charted its own course. Once active with the Ladies' Committee, OWC founder Dr. Fatima al-Turki felt the need to establish her own charity organization in Onaiza. (COMMENT: We have been told by other activists that Dr. Fatima has difficulty taking direction from Princess Noura or working with other female activists in Qassim, and therefore women in Onaiza prefer to work with the Princess Noura Center. END COMMENT.) While OWC has similar goals to KAPA

RIYADH 00000139 002.2 OF 003

and other organizations in the region, it has failed to attract a large number of supporters and funding and, in Post's view, has failed to achieve the same level of impact. (COMMENT: Although there are many strong and motivated women working to improve the lives of women in Qassim, the direct support of Princess Noura -- and the funding that comes with it -- is critical to the growth and success of any women's civil society in the Qassim area. END COMMENT.)

HERFAH: A SUCCESS STORY

¶5. (SBU) A visit to Herfah, the first production-based women's cooperative in Saudi Arabia, further highlighted the recent advancements the women of Qassim have made. Originally a sub-committee of the Qassim Ladies' Committee (ref A) focused on supporting the production of traditional Qassim handicrafts through training and marketing, Herfah was registered as a cooperative in late 2009. It now provides sustainable, regular, and sufficient income for its members -- Qassim women from low-income families. Housed in a beautiful, new building, Herfah has 160 members including 20 employees and 100 women who work on traditional handicrafts.

¶6. (SBU) While the focus of the cooperative is traditional handicrafts, Herfah has already started to expand into the production of traditional foods and a hospitality/catering service. Princess Noura's personal assistant of 11 years began training Saudi women in hospitality because she saw an under-utilized economic opportunity for Saudi women to work the frequent all-female gatherings, often with food being the central source of entertainment. Her informal training program was so popular and successful that it was recently brought under Herfah's umbrella, with Saudi women now responsible for managing the program and conducting all training.

¶7. (SBU) Herfah is also looking to the future to ensure its

long-term viability. Due to the societal restrictions placed on Saudi women, most of the cooperative members currently work out of their homes. Herfah is looking to change this by offering comprehensive services to its women which will include a kindergarten and nursery school inside the cooperative, a training center, and transportation to and from the cooperative. In order to remain competitive and ensure a stable income, Herfah is in the process of developing a new website and is actively seeking new markets for its products.

A TIGHT NETWORK OF LEADERS

¶8. (SBU) Princess Noura has continued her efforts, detailed in ref A, to identify key community leaders and managers for her various programs. She has patiently nurtured their leadership and management skills, while motivating Qassim women of all socio-economic backgrounds to actively participate in and benefit from the blossoming women's movement. The Qassim provincial elite continue to form the Princess's volunteer base, but women of lower economic and social standing in the region are slowly emerging as "leaders" as well -- a sign that the Qassim women's movement is not just for the Qassim elite.

A WOMAN OF THE PEOPLE

¶9. (SBU) Princess Noura is passionate about her work. On more than one occasion, Emboffs witnessed Princess Noura shedding tears, such as when she heard the personal stories of women whose lives had been changed by KAPA's micro-loan program, or when the high school daughter of Nawal Ajaji, the Secretary General of the Qassim Ladies' Committee, talked passionately about her optimism for the women of Saudi Arabia and how she wanted to follow in the footsteps of her own mother. Princess Noura stressed multiple times that she is only one part of the Qassim women's movement -- that KAPA, the Ladies' Committee, and the other civil societies and programs would not be a success if it was not for the collective efforts of all the Qassim women and their willingness to challenge the legal, social, economic and political barriers that prevent them from fully participating as equal members of Saudi society.

RIYADH 00000139 003.2 OF 003

SEEKING SAUDI FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

¶10. (SBU) The women of Qassim recognize the need for additional support and funding. As such, they are currently drafting proposals for large Saudi companies to co-sponsor various programs and projects. The proposals are well laid out and include cost-sharing measures and expected deliverables. (COMMENT: The timing of this could not be better as many large Saudi companies are currently looking for opportunities to invest in local programs and organizations. Because the women of Qassim are so well organized, Saudi companies have enthusiastically embraced these new partnership opportunities. END COMMENT.)

PLENTIFUL OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER COOPERATION

¶11. (C) Post has discreetly worked with KAPA and the Qassim Ladies' Committee for over four years, overseeing a large MEPI-funded Breast Cancer Awareness project, managing a local MEPI grant aimed at keeping young women in school, identifying and sending four KAPA activists on regional IVs, and sponsoring various workshops with professionals,

including English language specialists (ref A). During the 3-day visit to Qassim, Post identified a number of opportunities to strengthen existing cooperation as well as areas where new joint programs may be possible. Post will meet with representatives from Qassim in the coming weeks to prioritize future programs before drafting proposals. Some areas and opportunities we identified for new or increased cooperation are:

- Establishing an American Corner in Qassim
- Providing workshops on youth leadership development and how to recruit, empower and lead volunteers
- Assisting in preservation of traditional arts and handicrafts

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Princess Noura, through her hard work, ability to identify and motivate key leaders in the community, and generous financial support remains the glue that holds the Qassim women's movement together. However, with the sound leadership of the various women's civil societies firmly in place, a growing number of women from various socio-economic backgrounds becoming more and more active in the civil societies, and new sources of financial support being identified, the future success of the women's movement in Qassim no longer appears to be solely dependent on Princess Noura.

¶13. (C) Although hesitant to be seen in the spotlight, Princess Noura agreed that other Saudi women might benefit from a visit to Qassim in order to see a successful grassroots women's movement in action. In a country where activists tend to work alone or on a single issue, forging a larger, national movement is unheard of (ref B). Princess Noura's willingness to allow other Saudi women inside the dynamic, grassroots Qassim women's movement may be the first step in linking various activists and women's movements together, in order to form a more cohesive and pragmatic "Saudi women's movement" with many more faces. However, Post will continue to tread carefully and cooperate discreetly, respecting the "local" character of Qassim's women's movement. Too much publicity may negatively impact the Qassim women's movement, especially the women in key leadership positions at the various civil societies.

SMITH